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PACKET SWITCHING

Refers to protocols in which messages are divided into packets before they are sent. Each packet is then transmitted individually and can even follow different routes to its destination. Once all the packets forming a message arrive at the destination, they are recompiled into the original message.

Most modern Wide Area Network (WAN) protocols, including TCP/IP, X.25, and Frame Relay, are based on packet-switching technologies. In contrast, normal telephone service is based on a circuit-switching technology, in which a dedicated line is allocated for transmission between two parties. Circuit-switching is ideal when data must be transmitted quickly and must arrive in the same order in which it's sent. This is the case with most real-time data, such as live audio and video. Packet switching is more efficient and robust for data that can withstand some delays in transmission, such as e-mail messages and Web pages.

A new technology, ATM, attempts to combine the best of both worlds -- the guaranteed delivery of circuit-switched networks and the robustness and efficiency of packet-switching networks.

Related Terms

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